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ABSTRACT

This teaching guide packet is designed to accompany a 3-part television series, "Poetry Heaven," which captures many of the brightest and most memorable moments of the 1996 Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festival. The series presented in the packet features 18 poets whose personalities, voices, and points of view reflect the power and diversity of contemporary poetry. While the guide in the packet is intended to be used with the series, it can also serve teachers as a free-standing resource for the study of contemporary poetry. Included are: classroom cards, including 13 poet cards and 1 panel/conversation card (featuring poems, poet's statements, biographical notes, photographs, discussion questions, and suggested activities); an outline of each program which identifies featured poets and events; a time grid which provides timed locations for poems and panel/conversations in the TV series; advice to young poets; a selected bibliography; and suggestions for building a core high school poetry collection. Each program in the series is 60 minutes long and readings of individual poems are continuous. Recommendations for the teacher are: preview the program selected for discussion; have students watch the whole program on air or show segments in class; hand out photocopies of the classroom cards; discuss what has been watched; and have students do the activities. (NKA)

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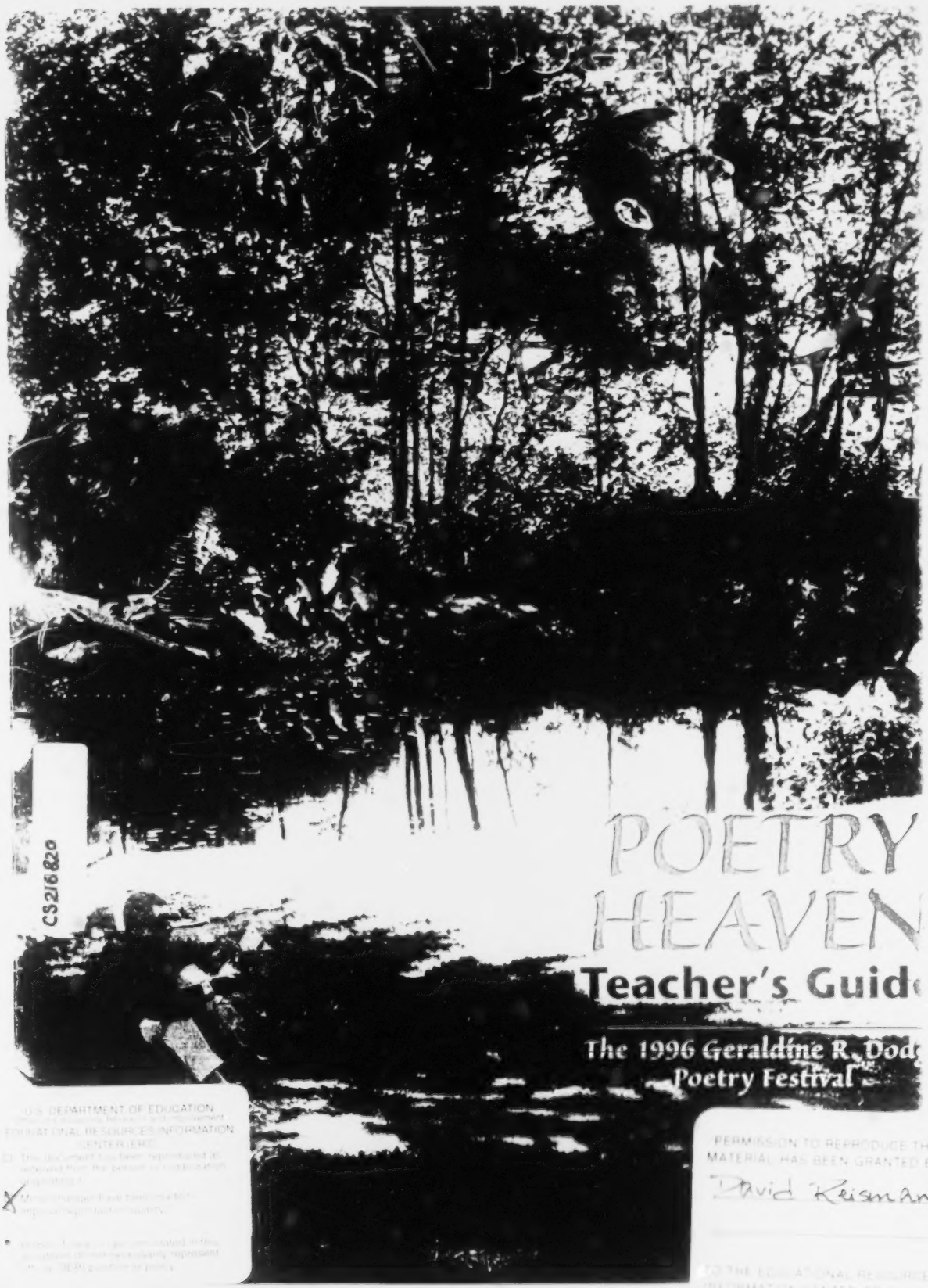

# POETRY HEAVEN

## Teacher's Guide

### The 1996 Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festival

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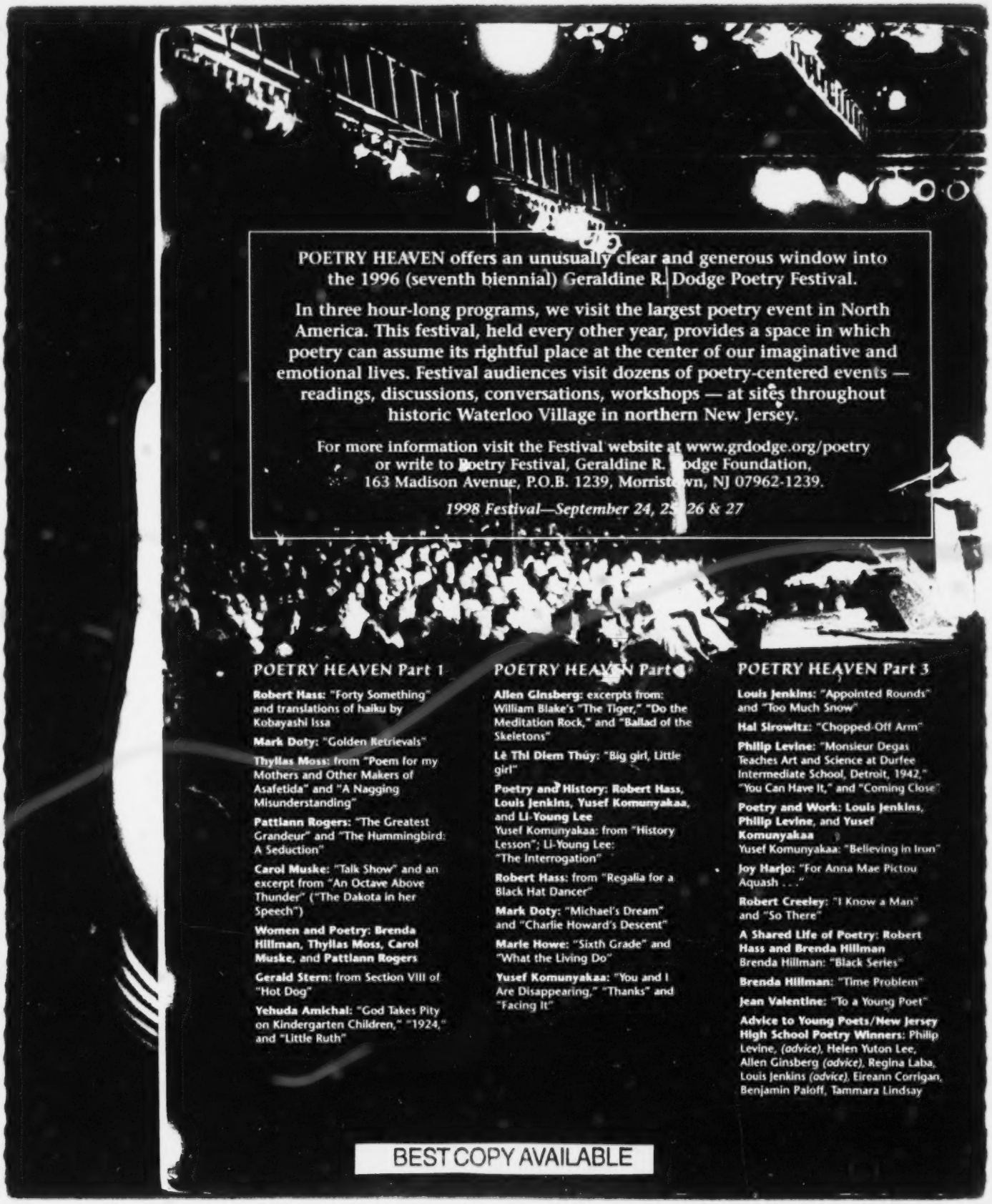

POETRY HEAVEN offers an unusually clear and generous window into the 1996 (seventh biennial) Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festival.

In three hour-long programs, we visit the largest poetry event in North America. This festival, held every other year, provides a space in which poetry can assume its rightful place at the center of our imaginative and emotional lives. Festival audiences visit dozens of poetry-centered events — readings, discussions, conversations, workshops — at sites throughout historic Waterloo Village in northern New Jersey.

For more information visit the Festival website at www.grdodge.org/poetry or write to Poetry Festival, Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, 163 Madison Avenue, P.O.B. 1239, Morristown, NJ 07962-1239.

*1998 Festival—September 24, 25, 26 & 27*

## POETRY HEAVEN Part 1

**Robert Hass:** "Forty Something" and translations of haiku by Kobayashi Issa

**Mark Doty:** "Golden Retrievals"

**Thyllas Moss:** from "Poem for my Mothers and Other Makers of Asafetida" and "A Nagging Misunderstanding"

**Pattiann Rogers:** "The Greatest Grandeur" and "The Hummingbird: A Seduction"

**Carol Muske:** "Talk Show" and an excerpt from "An Octave Above Thunder" ("The Dakota in her Speech")

**Women and Poetry: Brenda Hillman, Thyllas Moss, Carol Muske, and Pattiann Rogers**

**Gerald Stern:** from Section VIII of "Hot Dog"

**Yehuda Amichai:** "God Takes Pity on Kindergarten Children," "1924," and "Little Ruth"

## POETRY HEAVEN Part 2

**Allen Ginsberg:** excerpts from: William Blake's "The Tiger," "Do the Meditation Rock," and "Ballad of the Skeletons"

**Lê Thi Diem Thúy:** "Big girl, Little girl"

**Poetry and History: Robert Hass, Louis Jenkins, Yusef Komunyakaa, and Li-Young Lee**
Yusef Komunyakaa: from "History Lesson"; Li-Young Lee: "The Interrogation"

**Robert Hass:** from "Regalia for a Black Hat Dancer"

**Mark Doty:** "Michael's Dream" and "Charlie Howard's Descent"

**Marie Howe:** "Sixth Grade" and "What the Living Do"

**Yusef Komunyakaa:** "You and I Are Disappearing," "Thanks" and "Facing It"

## POETRY HEAVEN Part 3

**Louis Jenkins:** "Appointed Rounds" and "Too Much Snow"

**Hal Sirowitz:** "Chopped-Off Arm"

**Philip Levine:** "Monsieur Degas Teaches Art and Science at Durfee Intermediate School, Detroit, 1942," "You Can Have It," and "Coming Close"

**Poetry and Work: Louis Jenkins, Philip Levine, and Yusef Komunyakaa**
Yusef Komunyakaa: "Believing in Iron"

**Joy Harjo:** "For Anna Mae Pictou Aquash . . ."

**Robert Creeley:** "I Know a Man" and "So There"

**A Shared Life of Poetry: Robert Hass and Brenda Hillman**
Brenda Hillman: "Black Series"

**Brenda Hillman:** "Time Problem"

**Jean Valentine:** "To a Young Poet"

**Advice to Young Poets/New Jersey High School Poetry Winners:** Philip Levine, *(advice)*, Helen Yuton Lee, Allen Ginsberg *(advice)*, Regina Laba, Louis Jenkins *(advice)*, Eireann Corrigan, Benjamin Paloff, Tammara Lindsay

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ADVICE TO YOUNG POETS
MARK DOTY
"Don't quit too soon when you are working on a piece of writing."
BRENDA HILLMAN
"Look closely. Think on all levels. Revise toward strangeness. Don't lie."
JEAN VALENTINE
Poetry Heaven—Part 3
Born in Chicago in 1934, Jean Valentine has taught at major colleges and universities throughout the Northeast, including Columbia University, Sarah Lawrence College, Swarthmore College, and Yale University. She now lives in Ireland.
LOUIS JENKINS
"Think twice. Read everything you can get your hands on."
To a Young Poet
for Michael Klein
This January night at ten below I wish you
true desire, like a rose: to stand
in your chest. Veined. Bloom.
Let you be. Reflected in the train window,
inside a thousand circles of public darkness,
desire, a round red star.
And desire again, a foliating wand,
and you the Jack of Wands.
The round red rose of sleep in bloom. This is
true desire, it lets you be.
It says, "No money here."
What does it taste like?
True desire. Eye-
shadow, cinnamon.
"To a Young Poet" by Jean Valentine. From THE RIVER AT WOLF.
Copyright © 1992 by Jean Valentine. Reprinted by permission of Alice James Books.
ALLEN GINSBERG
"Learn some form of non-theistic meditation practice... Learn music."
PHILIP LEVINE
"What you need to learn is patience."
YEHUDA AMICHAI
"Write only as long as you want to write and need to write."
ROBERT HASS
"If you fall in love with poetry, read a lot and write a lot."
Unterwhet
356 West 58th Street
New York NY 10019

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*The words that appear on the cover mean "poetry."*

| | |
|---|---|
| *dichtkunst* | Dutch |
| *izinkondlo* | Zulu |
| *mele* | Hawaiian |
| *költészet* | Hungarian |
| *mga tula* | Philipino |
| *poésie* | French |
| *poezja* | Polish |
| *runous* | Finnish |
| *sayir* | Turkish |
| ***thi-ca*** | Vietnamese |
| שירה | Hebrew |
| 诗 | Chinese |
| բերթուած | Armenia |
| شعر | Arabic |
| कविता | Hindi |
| 詩 | Japanese |
| ποίηση | Greek |
| поэзия | Russian |
| কবিতা | Bengali |

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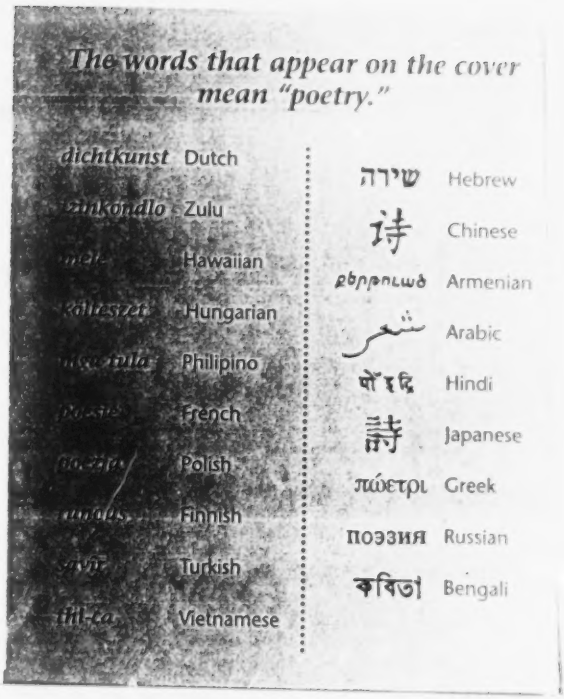


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# TIME GRID

*Please note:* Most VCRs do not offer the accuracy of information contained in the grid.

## POETRY HEAVEN Part 1

**Robert Hass** 01:27:04:24
"Forty Something" 02:32:03:09
Haiku translations 03:10:04:06

**Mark Doty** 04:24:10:59
"Golden Retrievals" 06:35:09:01

**Thylias Moss** 11:35:16:26
from "Poem for my Mothers and
Other Makers of Arabella"
12:14:14:58
"A Nagging Misunderstanding"
15:00:15:52

**Pattiann Rogers** 16:29:23:14
"The Greatest Grandeur"
16:54:19:14
"The Hummingbird: A Seduction"
19:53:22:53

**Carol Muske** 23:55:29:58
"Talk Show" 27:26:28:51
from "An Octave Above Thunder"
("The Dakota in her Speech")
28:53:29:56

**Women and Poetry** 30:00:39:10
Brenda Hillman, Thylias Moss, Carol
Muske & Pattiann Rogers
30:04:39:09

**Gerald Stern** 39:11:44:07
from Section VIII of "Hot Dog"
40:54:44:04

**Yehuda Amichai** 44:43:56:46
"God Takes Pity on Kindergarten
Children" 45:47:46:40 (English)
46:40:47:20 (Hebrew)
"1924" 49:34:52:01
"Little Ruth" 52:59:56:32

## POETRY HEAVEN Part 2

**Allen Ginsberg** 01:28:12:46
from William Blake's "The Tiger"
03:53:05:11
from "Do The Meditation Rock"
08:33:11:25
from "Ballad of the Skeletons"
11:33:12:35

**Le Thi Diem Thuy** 12:47:18:38
"Big girl, Little girl" 15:40:16:59

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Robert Hass, Louis Jenkins, Yusef
Komunyakaa and Li-Young Lee
Yusef Komunyakaa: from "History
Lessons" 20:21:21:25
Li-Young Lee: "The Interrogation"
21:45:23:58

**Robert Hass** 29:12:35:45
from "Regalo: Una Buca Hot Dance"
36:55:39:46

**Mark Doty** 36:53:44:32
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"Charm Howard's Descent"
40:09:42:46

**Marie Howe** 44:32:30:46
"Sixth Grade" 45:47:48:52
"What the Living Do" 48:43:00:46

**Yusef Komunyakaa** 50:38:56:03
"You and I are Disappearing"
51:09:52:50
"Thanks" 51:53:04:08
"Facing It" 54:41:59:16

## POETRY HEAVEN Part 3

**Louis Jenkins** 01:30:06:06
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"Too Much Snow" 04:34:06:04

**Hal Sirowitz** 06:09:08:11
"Chipped-Off Arm" 07:00:08:11

**Philip Levine** 08:25:39:20
"Monsieur Degas Teaches Art and
Science at Durfee Intermediate School
Detroit, 1942" 09:42:12:22
"You Can Have It" 13:26:16:17
"Coming Close" 16:49:19:16

**Poetry and Work** 19:23:25:45
Louis Jenkins, Philip Levine and Yusef
Komunyakaa
Yusef Komunyakaa: "Believing in Magic"
24:22:25:40

**Joy Harjo** 25:46:31:25
"For Anna Mae Pictou Aquash"
27:16:31:00

**Robert Creeley** 32:26:36:22
"I Know a Man" 32:03:32:26
"So There" 32:42:36:59

**A Shared Life of Poetry** 36:23:41:22
Robert Hass and Brenda Hillman
Brenda Hillman: "Black Series"
41:48:42:43

**Brenda Hillman** 43:23:48:03
"Time Problem" 44:00:48:02

**Jean Valentine** 48:06:49:44
"To A Young Poet" 48:26:49:57

**Advice to Young Poets: New Jersey High School Poetry Winners** 49:46:55:45
Philip Levine (advice) 50:10:50:43
Helen Yuton Lee 50:43:51:30
Allen Ginsberg (advice) 51:35:52:15
Regina Laba 52:16:53:41
Louis Jenkins (advice) 53:45:54:02
Eireann Corrigan 54:02:54:19
Benjamin Paloff 54:39:55:01
Tammara Lindsay 55:01:55:18

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# HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

## INTRODUCTION

POETRY HEAVEN is a three-part television series which captures many of the brightest and most memorable moments of the 1996 Getalbine B. Bodge Poetry Festival. Produced and directed by Jean Maudelbaum, POETRY HEAVEN features eighteen poets whose personalities, voices, and points of view reflect the power and diversity of contemporary poetry. In readings and in conversations, these poets welcome us both into their poems and into their lives. Their vivid language helps us to see more clearly the mystery, the contradictions, the pain, and the simple joy in our own lives. While this guide is designed to be used with the series, it can also serve teachers as a free-standing resource for the study of contemporary poetry.

## CONTENTS

This guide includes:

- **Classroom Cards** which may be photocopied and handed out to your students. Among them, you will find—

  **Thirteen Poet Cards**. These include a brief biography of each poet, selected poems that appear in the series, discussion questions, and classroom activities; and

  **One Panel Conversation Card** offering highlights of and questions about the series' four panel conversations.

- an **Outline** of each program which identifies featured poets and events;
- a **Time Grid** which provides timed locations for poems and panel conversations in POETRY HEAVEN;
- **Advice to Young Poets** which includes "To a Young Poet" by Jean Valentine and counsel by other poets in the series;
- **a Selected Bibliography** which includes representative works by series poets; and
- **Building a Core High School Poetry Collection**.

## USING THE GUIDE

Each program in POETRY HEAVEN is forty minutes. Readings of individual poems are sometimes cut, even when edited for length, and may be preceded or followed by commentary and conversation. Check both the **Outline** and the **Time Grid** for each program to find the segments you would like to focus on in class. Because some of the poets deal with what may be considered sensitive or disturbing subjects, **we recommend previewing the programs and reading the cards carefully** before assigning any of these materials to your class.

The following steps will help you get the most out of both the programs and the guide:

**Preview the program you would like to discuss**, and choose the segments you would like to show in class. Remember, you can tape programs from POETRY HEAVEN and keep them for one year after the broadcast.

**Have students watch the whole program** on air, or show segments in class.

**Hand out photocopies of the Classroom Cards.**

**Discuss what you have seen.** You may use the questions that appear on the cards.

**Have students do the activities.**

Frequently, questions and activities that appear on the Poet Cards may be adapted for discussing the work of other poets.

## A NOTE ON INTERDISCIPLINARY USE

This POETRY HEAVEN Teacher's Guide can be used in classes in the arts and social studies as well as in English classes. The poets in this series represent different cultures and different points of view. We encourage you to share these materials with your colleagues who are teaching other subjects.

## PROGRAM SCHEDULING

POETRY HEAVEN will be offered by satellite to PBS stations nationwide. Please contact your local public television station for scheduling information. POETRY HEAVEN was first broadcast by NPN in April, 1998. Thirteen/WNET in New York will broadcast it on May 30, 1998. Educators have the right to tape the programs and play them for instructional purposes for one year after broadcast.

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# ROBERT HASS

*"Almost all of my revising has to do with getting the relationship between being and dreaming so that it somehow feels to me like I'm telling the truth."*

*The first Poet Laureate from the western United States (1995-1997), Robert Hass often writes about the landscapes of the San Francisco Bay area where he was born in 1940 and where he still lives with his wife, the poet Brenda Hillman. A distinguished translator, he teaches at the University of California at Berkeley.*

**haiku**

New Year's Day—
everything is in blossom!
I feel about average.

*

Don't worry, spiders,
I keep house
casually.

*

Goes out,
comes back—
the loves of a cat.

*

Mosquito at my ear—
does it think
I'm deaf?

*from* **Regalia for a Black Hat Dancer**

In the morning, after running along the river:
'Creekstones practice the mild yoga of becoming smooth.'
By afternoon I was thinking: once you're smooth, you're dead.
'It is good sometimes that poetry should disenchant us,'
I wrote, and something about 'the heart's huge vacancy,'
which seemed contemptible. After dinner—sudden cooling
of the summer air—I sat down to it. Where.

❧

Walking down to Heart's Desire beach in the summer evenings
of the year my marriage ended—

though I was hollowed out by pain,
honeycombed with the emptiness of it,
like the bird bones on the beach
the salt of the bay water had worked on for a season—
such surprising lightness in the hand—
I don't think I could have told the pain of loss
from the pain of possibility,
though I knew they weren't the same thing.

When I think of that time, I think mainly of the osprey's cry,
a startled yelp,
the cry more a color than a sound, and as if
it ripped the sky, was white
as if it were scar tissue and fresh hurt at once.

(continued)



mashairi

# ROBERT HASS

*from* **Regalia for a Black Hat Dancer** *(continued)*

. . . . . .

Private pain is easy, in a way. It doesn't go away,
but you can teach yourself to see its size. Invent a ritual.
Walk up a mountain in the afternoon, gather up pine twigs.
Light a fire, thin smoke, not an ambitious fire,
and sit before it and watch it till it burns to ash
and the last gleam is gone from it, and dark falls.
Then you get up, brush yourself off, and walk back to the world.
If you're lucky, you're hungry.
In the town center
of Kwangju, there was a late October market fair.
Some guy was barbecuing halfs of baby chicks on a long, sooty
contraption
of a grill, slathering them with soy sauce. Baby chicks.
Corn pancakes stuffed with leeks and garlic. Some milky,
violent, sweet Korean barley wine or beer. Families strolling.
Booths hawking calculators, sox, dolls to ward off evil,
and computer games. Everywhere, of course, it was Korea,
people arguing politics, red-faced, women serving men.
I thought in this flesh-and-charcoal-scented heavy air
of the Buddha in his cave. Tired as if from making love
or writing through the night. Was I going to eat a baby chick?
Two pancakes. A clay mug of the beer. Sat down
under an umbrella and looked to see, among the diners
feasting, quarreling about their riven country,
if you were supposed to eat the bones. You were. I did.

**Forty Something**

She says to him, musing, "If you ever leave me,
and marry a younger woman and have another baby,
I'll put a knife in your heart." They are in bed,
so she climbs onto his chest, and looks directly
down into his eyes. "You understand? Your heart."

"Forty Something" and "Regalia for a Black Hat Dancer" from SUN UNDER WOOD by Robert Hass. Copyright © 1996 by Robert Hass. Reprinted by permission of the Ecco Press. "New Year's Day..," "Don't worry spiders..," "Goes out ..," and "Mosquito at my ear.." by Issa from THE ESSENTIAL HAIKU: VERSIONS OF BASHŌ, BUSON, AND ISSA, edited and verse translated by Robert Hass. Translation copyright © 1994 by Robert Hass. Reprinted by permission of the Ecco Press.



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poésie

## Questions

1. What state of mind do these haiku share?

2. In "Forty Something" why does only the woman speak? If the man were to speak, what would he say?

3. What does the speaker of "Regalia for a Black Hat Dancer" feel about eating baby chicks at the conclusion of the poem? Why does he eat them?

## Activities

1. Create a portrait of one or more of these haiku using music, dance, or visual images.

2. Compare this printed excerpt from "Regalia for a Black Hat Dancer" with the slightly longer version on the videotape and then compare that version with the complete text on the Dodge Web site — www. grdodge.org/poetry). Describe how your experience of the poem changed with each added level of completeness.

3. Research the culture and recent history of Korea, then write a brief explanation of how the qualities of its culture and history might contribute to the overall effectiveness of "Regalia for a Black Hat Dancer."

**poésie** *is french for poetry*

# MARK DOTY

**POETRY HEAVEN**
Parts 1, 2

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***"The point is not to believe or to express one belief but to live in the contradictions, to live in the questions. Poetry can help us stay awake to the possibilities."***

*Mark Doty's poems explore the human experience of memory and anticipation—our preoccupation with the past and the future — and encourage us to live more in the present. Aspects of nature — especially animals — are central to his work, as is a concern for our ability to cope nobly and gracefully with what is beyond our control. Mark Doty was born in 1953 in Memphis, Tennessee.*

*What have you done with*
*the hurtful names people*
*have given to you?*

**Charlie Howard's Descent**

Between the bridge and the river
he falls through
a huge portion of night;
it is not as if falling

is something new. Over and over
he slipped into the gulf
between what he knew and how
he was known. What others wanted

opened like an abyss: the laughing
stock-clerks at the grocery, women
at the luncheonette amused by his gestures.
What could he do, live

with one hand tied
behind his back? So he began to fall
into the star-faced section
of night between the trestle

and the water because he could not meet
a little town's demands,
and his earrings shone and his wrists
were as limp as they were.

I imagine he took the insults in
and made of them a place to live;
we learn to use the names
because they are there,

familiar furniture: *faggot*
was the bed he slept in, hard
and white, but simple somehow,
*queer* something sharp

but finally useful, a tool,
all the jokes a chair,
stiff-backed to keep the spine straight,
a table, a lamp. And because

he's fallen for twenty-three years,
despite whatever awkwardness
his flailing arms and legs assume
he is beautiful

and like any good diver
has only an edge of fear
he transforms into grace.
Or else he is not afraid,

and in this way climbs back
up the ladder of his fall,
out of the river into the arms
of the three teenage boys

who hurled him from the edge—
really boys now, afraid,
their fathers' cars shivering behind them,
headlights on—and tells them

it's all right, that he knows
they didn't believe him
when he said he couldn't swim,
and blesses his killers

in the way that only the dead
can afford to forgive.

# MARK DOTY

***Beau: Golden Retrievals***

Fetch? Balls and sticks engage my attention
seconds at a time. Catch? I don't think so.
Bunny, tumbling leaf, a squirrel who's—oh
joy—actually scared. Sniff the wind, then

I'm off again: muck, pond, ditch, residue
of any thrillingly dead thing. And you?
Either you're sunk in the past, half our walk,
thinking of what you can never bring back,
or else you're off in some fog concerning
—tomorrow, is that what it's called? My work:
to unsnare time's warp (and woof!), retrieving,
my haze-headed friend, you. This shining bark,

a Zen master's bronzy gong, calls you here,
entirely now: bow-wow, bow-wow, bow-wow.

—*Beau*

## Questions

1. In "Beau: Golden Retrievals," how is the dog's point of view different from that of its owner?

2. Mark Doty says that "poetry can make a shape, make a kind of vessel that contains feeling...." What kind of feelings does "Beau: Golden Retrievals" contain?

3. Compare "Charlie Howard's Descent" with Joy Harjo's "For Anna Mae Pictou Aquash." What are the similarities in subject matter and in tone? How are Charlie Howard and Anna Mae Aquash alike? What do the poems imply about being a member of a minority group?

izinkondlo

## Activities

1. Mark Doty says that his writing "always begins out of something that I need to make for me, something that I need to understand or to try to place into an order." Use the process of writing to create something you want to make for yourself or to understand something important. Begin by writing whatever comes into your head. Later, work with the words to try to create a meaningful "shape" that helps you express yourself and reach an understanding.

2. Write a poem, monologue, or song in which an animal speaks to you the way Beau speaks to Mark Doty. Describe what the animal says and what you learn from the animal.

3. Mark Doty says he uses writing as a way of rising above prejudice toward him and as a way of taking pride in his life. Create your own badge of honor—something that gives you pride in who you are. It could be a poem, a group of poems, or anything you choose to make.

"Beau: Golden Retrievals" by Mark Doty. From UNLEASHED: POEMS BY WRITER'S DOGS by Jim Shepard and Amy Hempel. Copyright © 1995 by Amy Hempel and Jim Shepard. Reprinted by permission of Crown Publishers, Inc.
"Charlie Howard's Descent" from TURTLE, SWAN by Mark Doty. Reprinted by permission of David R. Godine, Publisher, Inc. Copyright © 1987 by Mark Doty.

**izinkondlo** *is Zulu for poetry.*

# THYLIAS MOSS



***"Everything that I write acknowledges some sort of living that occurred."***

*In tough, no-nonsense poems, Thylias Moss explores issues of identity, including race, gender, nationality, family relationships, and occupation. Born in Cleveland, Ohio in 1954, she finds power in using words "to cure, to remake, to place things as they should be." She feels there is "no limitation" to our ability to do so.*

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How well have
you made
your bed?



**POEM FOR MY MOTHERS AND OTHER MAKERS OF ASAFETIDA**

Brown in the bottle, my
honeyed memory of my grandmother in
which I drench myself, pour over myself
one of her tight hugs, homemade gravy on
lips and ribs, eventually hips, *taste her, taste her*
and feast on my church in a bottle, the
gospel like Sis. Posey sings it, *oh when, when will*
*I get home?* Looking over Dixie, over
Jordan, river of life, needing to cross (already got
*a* cross), needing to swim to *Jordan's stormy*
*other shore*, listen: the brown choir's brown liquid voice,
my arms moving me through it, swimming is just directing
the choir, giving instructions, *Mama always told me to be still*
*sometimes and feel the power;* wait while the river moves down my
throat, urine the rest of the miracle that makes of me
a fountain; nasty asafetida, tastes like the bootleg, jackleg
medicine it is
curing me as only generations can, asafetida is *a quilt*
*for my innards*, she said, up to her neck in gizzards, hocks, pickled
pig's feet, her hands good as dull knives that can't
have accidents.
And everywhere, everywhere eggs like teeth big as
what memory does to Grandma. Even the heart of gold.

Finally
the asafetida toast just after gunfire, the new year
shot for coming uninvited, ahead of schedule, years
coming and going, out of control, Trojan years bringing
lots of what we don't want set loose in foreclosed fields
of stone potatoes so hardhearted, hardheaded there are
no eyes except the ones I look into and fall in love, right
into Mama's pupils, the past dark with dense ancestry, all
who came before having to fit into the available space of

*(continued)*

# THYLIAS MOSS

## POEM FOR MY MOTHERS AND OTHER MAKERS OF ASAFETIDA *(continued)*

history which is existence's memory and year after year
the overcrowding worsens, *remember; remember: darkest before*
*the day every dog will have,* we are dogs sometimes, vestiges
of our evolution giving us dreams, instincts, secrets for dark
recall; nothing really goes away
especially not that sickening paradox, falling to reach
the sublime emotion; want to rise in love, want a boost,
elevator ride to the penthouse, silk jacket smoking
with lust, man making it with an asafetida bottle, a glass
mama with an excuse for breaking; whatever sustains you is your
mama, that wall holding back wind, jazz on the airwaves and in
the Thunderbird, the Boone's Farm; the oar smacking discipline
into fish while ferrying you across the water
that takes you back to old Virginny, every visit is return
to the scene of crimes, so much happened there, so much history
there; rivers are sad affairs flowing between past and future
like pompous blue (if sunny) ribbons that must deepen, widen
or spill to really go anywhere and still there are limits,
disillusionment to cap any growth, live to the fullest and just
have more to lose to death but Grandma said, Mama says, now
I say: *maybe possible to have so much*
*death can't take it all;* asafetida still on the shelf, oil in the puddle
still ghetto stained glass, still rainbow remnants in rock
bottom ghetto sky like a promise of no more tears, asafetida
bottle floating there, some kind of Moses, some kind
of deliverer, there's always a way.
Away means not here. Place where bagpipes echo
with sound of a stuck doll calling *Mama, Mama,* nothing
but inspiration in the air, and the prophet Jolson
proclaiming *Mammy,* asking for her who can make him
wash his face; she's the one who can turn it into
something to love.



## A NAGGING MISUNDERSTANDING

*Let me clear up a nagging misunderstanding: This*
*is the way to make the white woman's bed; she thinks*
*I make it because she is rich, she thinks I make it*
*to get her money, that I can't get money any other*
*way, no skills, no intelligence, no contribution to*
*society but for her four poster, but I make her bed*
*because on judgment day, you will have to sleep*
*in the bed you made and I make damn good ones but*
*she didn't make any.*

költészet

### Questions

1. How is "Poem for my Mothers and Other Makers of Asafetida" a poem of memory? What specific words and images does the poet use to convey this impression?

2. Thylias Moss says that in going to church as a child, she was "taken more with the delivery from the preacher." She continues, "This man could cause great commotion with just his voice." How does her reading of the poem reflect her childhood experience?

3. How does Thylias Moss's reading of the poem differ from the poem on the page?

### Activities

1. Research information about asafetida. Describe the use of a similar product in your own life or in someone else's. Explain why such a product often has a lasting memory for users.

2. Identify someone whose manner of speaking you admire. Describe what impresses you about the person's way of speaking. In a small group, read something the way that person might read it. Use facial, hand, and other bodily gestures that the person might use. Describe the experience of impersonating someone.

3. "A Nagging Misunderstanding" draws on an aphorism — "sleeping in the bed you make." Choose another aphorism or proverb, and create a poem around it. Use irony and humor the way Thylias Moss did.

"Poem for My Mothers and Other Makers of Asafetida" and "A Nagging Misunderstanding" (from "The Linoleum Rhumba") from RAINBOW REMNANTS IN ROCK BOTTOM GHETTO SKY by Thylias Moss. Copyright © 1991 by Thylias Moss. Reprinted by permission of Persea Books, Inc.

# PATTIANN ROGERS



***"The naming of the natural world is, to me, an act of praise and honoring and gratitude."***

*Pattiann Rogers has written six books of poetry in which she celebrates the grandeur of "all nature, even our own." She was born in 1940 in Joplin, Missouri, and spent the first twenty years of her life there. Since leaving Missouri, she has lived in Texas and now lives in Colorado.*

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## The Hummingbird: A Seduction

If I were a female hummingbird perched still
And quiet on an upper myrtle branch
In the spring afternoon and if you were a male
Alone in the whole heavens before me, having parted
Yourself, for me, from cedar top and honeysuckle stem
And earth down, your body hovering in midair
Far away from the jewelweed, thistle and bee balm;

And if I watched how you fell, plummeting before me,
And how you rose again and fell, with such mastery
That I believed for a moment *you* were the sky
And the red-marked bird diving inside your circumference
Was just the physical revelation of the light's
Most perfect desire;

And if I saw your sweeping and sucking
Performance of swirling egg and semen in the air,
The weaving, twisting vision of red petal
And nectar and soaring rump, the rush of your wing
In its grand confusion of arcing and splitting
Created completely out of nothing just for me,

Then when you came down to me, I would call you
My own spinning bloom of ruby sage, my funnelling
Storm of sunlit sperm and pollen, my only breathless
Piece of scarlet sky, and I would bless the base
Of each of your feathers and touch the tine
Of string muscles binding your wings and taste
The odor of your glistening oils and hunt
The honey in your crimson flare
And I would take you and take you and take you
Deep into any kind of nest you ever wanted.

## Question

Pattiann Rogers uses the mating behavior of a hummingbird as a metaphor for her fantasy of romantic courtship. How does her development of that metaphor illuminate human capacity for language and love?

## Activities

1. What is your fantasy of the stages of courtship between two people? Use metaphor to express your ideas in writing.

2. Choose some non-human object from nature and personify it the way Pattiann Rogers did with the hummingbirds. Choose more than one object, if you like. Describe an event using aspects of both the non-human object (or objects) and humans, including physical descriptions and behavior. Your description may be in the form of a poem, play, essay, or painting.

"The Hummingbird: A Seduction" is by Pattiann Rogers from FIREKEEPER (Milkweed Editions, © 1994). Reprinted with permission from Milkweed Editions. Previously published in *The Tattooed Lady in the Garden*.

pjesništvo

*What kind of bird would you like to be? What kind of bird are you?*

**pjesništvo** is Croatian for poetry.

# CAROL MUSKE



***"Poems find a way to hold time for us so that we lose track of the temporal structure of our lives, and memorizing a poem does the same thing."***

*Carol Muske (born in St. Paul, Minnesota in 1945) has published six volumes of poetry and two novels. She teaches English and Creative Writing at the University of Southern California and writes regularly for the New York Times and The Nation. She is married to the actor David Dukes and lives in Los Angeles.*

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*What is one way you learned to love, and how did you learn it?*

### Talk Show

Our host was a diamond stickpin,
a star,
and I sat on his couch all night
recalling my childhood.
The kliegs leaned for me,
as I sunned
under the illusion of height.

Our host bowed his head
admitting that there was an Asia,
that death was a fact for u
I forgave Hollywood its wars,
the perpetual monsoon.
I forgave our coronor
for the cockfights,
the miles of dead cypress,
and courted fame,
my face smiling away from my face.

*Who* said the host
*are you?*
And I smiled *my* smile
as the band played half time
and the word APPLAUSE rose
like a shrewd moon
over Mother Pacific.

### from AN OCTAVE ABOVE THUNDER

**2**

The Dakota in her speech—windy,
oddly shepherded, always bending—
lilts of Czech and Norwegian, dumb cousin Swede.

How had my task become shaking free those words
from the rhythms of her voice into the imperatives
of the poets who wrote them—

When everything whirling otherwise
in my head re-settled syntax? From her I learned
a further thing. I heard it in her riptide parataxis:

*compassion.* Her wrong emphasis on the right
words shunted a way to love, the only kind I knew.

Words: off-kilter, oddly phrased and therefore
inevitable. Stumbling orphaned heart, awake at
that first funeral—who was she? Sixteen,

standing at her mother's grave. Iris, iris—
salutatorian and the smell of lilac,
sabotaged.

"Talk Show" from CAMOUFLAGE, by Carol Muske, © 1975. Reprinted by permission of the University of Pittsburgh Press. "An Octave Above Thunder" from AN OCTAVE ABOVE THUNDER by Carol Muske. Copyright © 1997 by Carol Muske. Used by permission of Penguin, a division of Penguin Putnam, Inc.

### Questions

1. How would you describe the arc of feeling in the excerpt from "An Octave Above Thunder"? What is the effect of ending the poem with the word "sabotaged" as its final line?

2. How does the speaker in "Talk Show" feel about the event in which she/he is participating?

### Activities

1. With another person, silently enact the scene presented in "Talk Show." Let your gestures and facial expressions alone tell the story in the poem.

2. Consider the speech patterns of someone close to you. Try to identify and describe those speech patterns and then list the human qualities they reveal.

ПОЭЗИЯ *is Russian for poetry.*

# GERALD STERN



***"By and large there is a lovely sense of kinship among poets, as if we all share some secret that we can't quite name—what it is to be a poet."***

*Born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1925, Gerald Stern often lays claim to places and things other people have abandoned. His poems explore past time and heritage, seeking to relocate them in an ecstatic present. Having taught at dozens of colleges and universities, he now lives in Lambertville, New Jersey and in Manhattan.*

© LYNN SAVILLE

## Who would you like to follow? And how far?

### Questions

1. What forces does the speaker in this poem want to bring back into his arms?
2. Based on this brief sample, what qualities do the poems of Whitman and Stern actually have in common? How do their poems differ?

### Activities

1. Compare the printed excerpt above with the full text of section VIII of "Hot Dog" on the Dodge website (www.grdodge.org/ poetry) and describe the effect of this editing on your experience of the poem.
2. Research the life and poetry of Walt Whitman and compare what you find with the picture provided here by Stern.

*from* **Hot Dog, Section VIII**

I followed Whitman
through half of Camden, across on the ferry and back
to Water Street; I lay down on his bed
and pushed my hand against the wall to bring
the forces back into my arms; I sang
something from *Carmen*, something from *La Bohème*,
and held my right hand up in the old salute
as music from my favorite regiment
came through the window glass as if to translate
not only the dust of those marching feet but the pails
of lopped-off arms and legs. I lay there thinking,
when I was dead—when he was dead—there would be
ten or more diseases, God knows what
they'd find if they cut him open, consumption, pneumonia,
fatty liver, gallstones, spongy abscesses,
collapsed lungs, tuberculosis of the stomach,
swollen brains. I lay there thinking his death
was lovely, just what he wanted. Mickle Street
was filled with people, for half a day, they stood
in front of the house and walked inside to stare
at the corpse. Thousands followed him to the grave
and filled up the giant tent or crowded the grass
around the tent, the grass he loved, the handkerchief,
the uncut powdered hair. How cunning it was
for them to walk on his head, he with that haircut,
he with that lotion, he whose grass kept growing
through all the speeches. . . .
. . . His last
good thought was how he scattered blossoms, I called them,
he said, O blossoms of my blood! O slender
leaves, you burn and sting me, it is your roots
I love, it is this death I love, I called it
exhilarating, twice now, out of my breast
the dark grass grew, I will never utter a call
only their call, put your hand in mine,
incline your face. Do you remember the body?
Do you remember lawlessness? I turned
around to face the window, . . .
. . . the church
is gone, there is a huge county jail
across the way, . . .
. . . the soot
and smoke are gone, the ferry goes back and forth
only to the new blue-and-white aquarium,
and there is a thing called "Mickle Towers" two blocks
down, and acres of grass now and empty bottles—
that at least hasn't changed; I hiss one word
from my Phoenician, the bed is too narrow, a bird
is actually singing out there.

"Hot Dog" from ODD MERCY: POEMS by Gerald Stern. Copyright ©1995 by Gerald Stern. Used by arrangement with W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.

# LÊ THI DIEM THÚY



***"A lot of what I want to capture with words is the slipperiness of language and the slipperiness of experience."***

*In her poems, Lê Thi Diem Thúy explores issues of memory, personal and political violence, and dislocation. Born in South Vietnam in 1972, she was raised in California. In 1995, she created a one-woman show with music, drama, and poetry that explored the same themes as her poetry.*

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## Big girl, Little girl

*wearing her dress*
*like i wear her name*

don't you know
sweat makes it mine
it means i'm here and living
when it was yours you drenched it in
ocean
water
soaked it wet with your death
ma had to keep it in the silky compartment of her suitcase
folded small and tight like a secret
and like a secret, it never dried

. . .

if i hadn't dragged this dress out of the attic
it would have spilled out
and me,
the biggest girl now that you're gone
i would have had to swish you round the floor
until everything you spilled was soaked dry
by this dress

. . .

isn't it better
i dry it on my body
each drop of sweat
pushing back the waves so that
when i'm the age you left
dying
i will have pushed the entire ocean out
and gone leaping across it
both legs kicking in the air
the way we used to leap over jump ropes
running to meet on the other side

it didn't even touch me, we'd say

"Big girl, Little girl" by Lê Thi Diem Thuy.
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*What makes something truly yours?*

### Questions

1. What conclusions can you draw about how the girl died, the poet's relationship to the girl, the poet's attitudes toward the girl, and why the poet avoided saying exactly how the girl died?

2. What does the poet fantasize that wearing the dress will do for her? How do her memories contribute to that fantasy?

### Activities

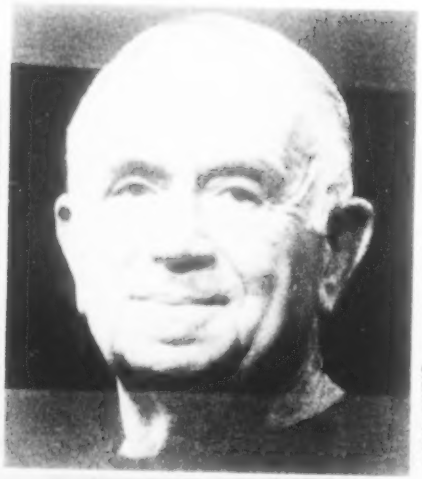
1. Create a real or fantasy memorial to someone who is no longer alive. Identify and describe objects that you would include in the memorial and explain their meaning to you and what they might have meant to the person who died.

2. Think about some things that seem to you slippery in language and in your experience. Write a poem, essay, or story that captures some of that slipperiness.

# YEHUDA AMICHAI

***"We all write for this moment, and that's where eternity is."***

*Yehuda Amichai was born in 1924 in Germany and emigrated with his parents to Palestine in 1935. He now lives in Jerusalem. A veteran soldier, he fought in WWII, the Israeli War of Independence (1948), the Sinai Campaign (1956), and the Yom Kippur War (1973). His work has been translated into thirty-three languages.*



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## God Takes Pity on Kindergarten Children

God takes pity on kindergarten children,
Less on schoolchildren.
On grownups, He won't take pity anymore.
He leaves them alone.
Sometime they have to crawl on all fours
In the blazing sand,
To get to the first aid station
Dripping blood.

Maybe He will take pity and cast His shadow
On those who truly love
As a tree on someone sleeping on the bench
On a boulevard.

Maybe we too will spend on them
The last coins of favor
Mother bequeathed us,
So their bliss will protect us
Now and in other days.

## 1924

I was born in 1924. If I were a violin my age
I wouldn't be very good. As a wine I would be splendid
Or altogether sour. As a dog I would be dead. As a book
I would begin to be expensive or thrown out by now.
As a forest I would be young, as a machine ridiculous,
And as a human being I'm very tired.

I was born in 1924. When I think about humanity
I think just about those born in my year.
Their mothers gave birth with my mother,
Wherever they were, in hospitals or in dark flats.

On this day, my birthday, I would like
To say a great prayer for you,
Whose load of hopes and disappointments
Pulls your life downward,
Whose deeds diminish
And whose gods increase,
You are all brothers of my hope and companions of my despair.

May you find the right rest,
The living in their life, the dead in their death.

He who remembers his childhood better
Than others is the winner,
If there are any winners at all.

*Who or what is your one suitcase*
*that returns and disappears again?*

# YEHUDA AMICHAI

### Little Ruth

Sometimes I remember you, little Ruth,
We were separated in our distant childhood and they burned you in the camps.
If you were alive now, you would be a woman of sixty-five,
A woman on the verge of old age. At twenty you were burned
And I don't know what happened to you in your short life
Since we separated. What did you achieve, what insignia
Did they put on your shoulders, your sleeves, your
Brave soul, what shining stars
Did they pin on you, what decorations for valor, what
Medals for love hung around your neck,
What peace upon you, *peace unto you.*
And what happened to the unused years of your life?
Are they still packed away in pretty bundles,
Were they added to my life? Did you turn me
Into your bank of love like the banks in Switzerland
Where assets are preserved even after their owners are dead?
Will I leave all this to my children
Whom you never saw?
You gave your life to me, like a wine dealer
Who remains sober himself.
You sober in death, lucid in the dark
For me, drunk on life, wallowing in my forgetfulness.
Now and then, I remember you in times
Unbelievable. And in places not made for memory
But for the transient, the passing that does not remain.
As in an airport, when the arriving travelers
Stand tired at the revolving conveyor belt
That brings their suitcases and packages,
And they identify theirs with cries of joy
As at a resurrection and go out into their lives;
And there is one suitcase that returns and disappears again
And returns again, ever so slowly, in the empty hall,
Again and again it passes.
This is how your quiet figure passes by me,
This is how I remember you until
The conveyor belt stands still. *And they stood still. Amen.*

poesía

"God Takes Pity on Kindergarten Children," "1924" and "Little Ruth" by Yehuda Amichai. From YEHUDA AMICHAI: A LIFE OF POETRY, 1948-1994. Selected and translated by Benjamin and Barbara Harshav. Copyright © 1994 by HarperCollins Publishers, Inc. Hebrew language version copyright © 1994 by Yehuda Amichai.



## Questions

1. Why does the speaker in "Little Ruth" particularly remember Little Ruth "in places not made for memory"? Why does this poem end with "Amen"?

2. The most recent English translation of "Kindergarten Children" uses "Has" instead of "Takes" in the title and in the first line. What is the effect of changing this one word?

## Activities

1. Make a list of the qualities you would now have if you were not yourself, but something else which also came into being during the year of your birth. Organize this list so as to give it maximum meaning and surprise.

2. Reflect upon Amichai's introduction to "Little Ruth" on the videotape and research the fate of Jewish children during the Holocaust. Write an explanation of how poetry can help us to approach such extreme experiences.

# ALLEN GINSBERG

**POETRY HEAVEN**
Parts 2, 3

***"Take a friendly attitude toward your thoughts, no matter how outrageous, how zany, how disgusting, or how great."***

*Born in Newark, New Jersey in 1926, Allen Ginsberg was the central figure among Beat Poets. Travel, study, and spiritual explorations led to his "improvised poetry": spontaneous utterance linked to music and the communal role of the poet in the ancient bardic tradition. He lived on Manhattan's Lower East Side until his death in April, 1997.*

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How does it feel to do nothing at all?

Allegro
A D A
If you want to learn how to me - di - tate I'll
E A
tell you how 'cause it's ne - ver too late I'll
D A
tell you how 'cause I can't wait it's
E
just that great that it's ne - ver too late
A
Do the me - di - ta - tion
D
Do the me - di - ta - tion
A E
lean a lit-tle Pa - tience and Ge - ne - ro - si - ty Ge - ne
D
ro - si - ty Gen - ne - ro - si - ty Ge - ne
A E A DC
ro - si - ty and Ge - ne - ro - si - ty

**Do the Meditation Rock**

Tune: *I fought the Dharma, and the Dharma won*

If you want to learn — how to meditate
I'll tell you now — 'cause it's never too late
I'll tell you how — 'cause I can't wait
it's just that great — that it's never too late
If you are an old — fraud like me
or a lama who lives — in Eternity
The first thing you do — when you meditate
is keep your spine — your backbone straight
Sit yourself down — on a pillow on the ground
or sit in a chair — if the ground isn't there
*Do the meditation* — *Do the meditation*
*Learn a little Patience and Generosity*

*(continued)*



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# ALLEN GINSBERG

**Do the Meditation Rock** *(continued)*

Follow your breath out — open your eyes
and sit there steady — & sit there wise
Follow your breath right — outta your nose
follow it out — as far as it goes
Follow your breath — but don't hang on
to the thought of yr death — in old Saigon
Follow your breath — when thought forms rise
whatever you think — it's a big surprise
*Do the meditation* — *Do the meditation*
*Learn a little Patience and Generosity*
*Generosity Generosity Generosity & Generosity*

All you got to do — is to imitate
you're sitting meditating — and you're never too late
when thoughts catch up — but your breath goes on
forget what you thought — about Uncle Don
Laurel Hardy Uncle Don — Charlie Chaplin Uncle Don
you don't have to drop — your nuclear bomb
If you see a vision come — say Hello Goodbye
play it dumb — with an empty eye
if you want a holocaust — you can recall your mind
it just went past — with the Western wind
*Do the meditation* — *Do the meditation*
*Learn a little Patience* — *& Generosity*

If you see Apocalypse — in a long red car
or a flying saucer — sit where you are
If you feel a little bliss — don't worry about that
give your wife a kiss — when your tire goes flat
If you can't think straight — & you don't know who to call
it's never too late — to do nothing at all
Do the meditation — follow your breath
so your body & mind — get together for a rest
*Do the meditation* — *Do the meditation*
*Learn a little Patience* — *and Generosity*

If you sit for an hour — or a minute every day
you can tell the Superpower — to sit the same way
you can tell the Superpower — to watch and wait
& to stop & meditate — 'cause it's never too late
*Do the meditation* — *Do the meditation*
*Get yourself together* — *lots of Energy*
*& Generosity Generosity Generosity & Generosity!*

*St. Mark's Place, Xmas 1981*

puisi

## Questions

1. What does this poem suggest are the benefits of meditation?

2. How does the music scored for this poem contribute to our experience of it?

## Activities

1. Assemble a group that includes at least one musician with an instrument and take turns singing or chanting alternate sections of the poem—whole stanzas or only the refrain lines.

2. Research Buddhist Samatha-Vipassana sitting practice of meditation and describe the relationship between what this poem prescribes and traditional practice.

3. Follow the directions offered by this poem and describe your experience.

"Do the Meditation Rock" by Allen Ginsberg. From SELECTED POEMS 1947-1995. Copyright © 1996 by Allen Ginsberg. Reprinted by permission of HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.

# MARIE HOWE



***"A lot of my writing has been trying to move into those silent places to what I can't remember, to what I am told I shouldn't remember."***

*Marie Howe has written two books of poetry and edited a book of writings which address the AIDS pandemic. Her poems explore the spiritual aspects of daily life, including awareness of living and of dying. She also emphasizes recovering lost or repressed memories—reclaiming experiences that may have been too frightening to remember.*

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**Sixth Grade**

The afternoon the neighborhood boys tied me and Mary Lou Mahar
to Donny Ralph's father's garage doors, spread-eagled,
it was the summer they chased us almost every day.

Careening across the lawns they'd mowed for money,
on bikes they threw down, they'd catch us, lie on top of us,
then get up and walk away.

That afternoon Donny's mother wasn't home.
His nine sisters and brothers gone—even Gramps, who lived with them,
gone somewhere—the backyard empty, the big house quiet.

A gang of boys. They pulled the heavy garage doors down,
and tied us to them with clothesline,
and Donny got the deer's leg severed from the buck his dad had killed

the year before, dried up and still fur-covered, and sort of
poked it at us, dancing around the blacktop in his sneakers, laughing.
Then somebody took it from Donny and did it.

And then somebody else, and somebody after him.
Then Donny pulled up Mary Lou's dress and held it up,
and she began to cry, and I became a boy again, and shouted Stop,

and they wouldn't.
Then a girl-boy, calling out to Charlie, my best friend's brother,
who wouldn't look

Charlie! To my brother's friend who knew me
Stop them. And he wouldn't.
And then more softly, and looking directly at him, I said, Charlie.

And he said Stop. And they said What? And he said Stop it.
And they did, quickly untying the ropes, weirdly quiet,
Mary Lou still weeping. And Charlie? Already gone.

ΠΟΙΕΤΡΙ

*How does it feel to say, "Stop it," to one group of friends on behalf of another friend?*

# MARIE HOWE

### What the Living Do

Johnny, the kitchen sink has been clogged for days, some utensil probably
fell down there.
And the Drano won't work but smells dangerous, and the crusty dishes
have piled up

waiting for the plumber I still haven't called. This is the everyday we
spoke of.
It's winter again: the sky's a deep headstrong blue, and the sunlight
pours through

the open living room windows because the heat's on too high in here, and
I can't turn it off.
For weeks now, driving, or dropping a bag of groceries in the street,
the bag breaking,

I've been thinking: This is what the living do. And yesterday, hurrying
along those
wobbly bricks in the Cambridge sidewalk, spilling my coffee down my
wrist and sleeve,

I thought it again, and again later, when buying a hairbrush: This is it.
Parking. Slamming the car door shut in the cold. What you called
*that yearning.*

What you finally gave up. We want the spring to come and the winter to
pass. We want
whoever to call or not call, a letter, a kiss—we want more and more and
then more of it.

But there are moments, walking, when I catch a glimpse of myself in the
window glass,
say, the window of the corner video store, and I'm gripped by a cherishing
so deep

for my own blowing hair, chapped face, and unbuttoned coat that I'm
speechless:
I am living, I remember you.

## Questions

1. In "Sixth Grade" Marie Howe looks back on a painful childhood experience. What value do you think this reflection and retelling have for her?

2. How does the poet's choice of specific words and phrases in "Sixth Grade" reflect the fact that the children were young?

3. What does the poem "What the Living Do" tell you about the way in which the poet is mourning someone who has died? What emotions does the poem convey?

4. What do you think "What the Living Do" conveys to "the living"?

## Activities

1. Think about a time when you or someone else had the power to stop something that could have hurt another person. Describe how you or the other person used the power — or didn't use it — and what the outcome was.

2. How might one of the other children in "Sixth Grade" tell the story? Write a poem or scene from the point of view of one of the other kids.

3. Make a list of everyday things that remind you of someone who is no longer in your daily life. Describe how those things help you to remember that person.

"Sixth Grade" and "What the Living Do" by Marie Howe, from WHAT THE LIVING DO. Copyright © 1997 by Marie Howe. Used by arrangement with W.W. Norton & Company.

# YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA



***"I am interested in how beauty and terror are in the same frame—that you can place them side by side and that they create a certain kind of tension."***

*Born in Bogalusa, Louisiana in 1947, Yusef Komunyakaa was the first black man to win a Pulitzer Prize for Poetry (1994). A Vietnam veteran, he did not write about the war until more than a decade after returning to the United States. He has published nine books of poetry and teaches at Princeton University.*

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## History Lessons

### 1

Squinting up at leafy sunlight, I stepped back
& shaded my eyes, but couldn't see what she pointed to.
The courthouse lawn where the lone poplar stood
Was almost flat as a pool table. Twenty-five
Years earlier it had been a stage for half the town:
Cain & poor white trash. A picnic on saint augustine
Grass. No, I couldn't see the piece of blonde rope.
I stepped closer to her, to where we were almost
In each other's arms, & then spotted the flayed
Tassel of wind-whipped hemp knotted around a limb
Like a hank of hair, a weather-whitened bloom
In hungry light. That was where they prodded him
Up into the flatbed of a pickup.

### 2

We had coffee & chicory with lots of milk.
Hoecakes, bacon, & gooseberry jam. She told me
How a white woman in The Terrace
Said that she shot a man who tried to rape her,
How their car lights crawled sage fields
Midnight to daybreak, how a young black boxer
Was running & punching the air at sunrise,
How they tarred & feathered him & dragged the corpse
Behind a Model T through the Mill Quarters,
How they dumped the prizefighter on his mother's doorstep,
How two days later three boys
Found a white man dead under the trestle
In blackface, the woman's bullet
In his chest, his head on a clump of sedge.

### 3

When I stepped out on the back porch
The pick-up man from Bogalusa Dry Cleaners
Leaned against his van, with an armload
Of her Sunday dresses, telling her
Emmett Till had begged for it
With his damn wolf whistle.
She was looking at the lye-scoured floor,
White as his face. The hot words
Swarmed out of my mouth like African bees
& my fists were cocked,
Hammers in the air. He popped
The clutch when he turned the corner,
As she pulled me into her arms
& whispered, *Son, you ain't gonna live long.*

*When was the last time*
*you were a window,*
*and how did it feel?*

# YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA

### Thanks

Thanks for the tree
between me & a sniper's bullet.
I don't know what made the grass
sway seconds before the Viet Cong
raised his soundless rifle.
Some voice always followed,
telling me which foot
to put down first.
Thanks for deflecting the ricochet
against that anarchy of dusk.
I was back in San Francisco
wrapped up in a woman's wild colors,
causing some dark bird's love call
to be shattered by daylight
when my hands reached up
& pulled a branch away
from my face. Thanks
for the vague white flower
that pointed to the gleaming metal
reflecting how it is to be broken
like mist over the grass,
as we played some deadly
game for blind gods.
What made me spot the monarch
writhing on a single thread
tied to a farmer's gate,
holding the day together
like an unfingered guitar string,
is beyond me. Maybe the hills
grew weary & leaned a little in the heat.
Again, thanks for the dud
hand grenade tossed at my feet
outside Chu Lai. I'm still
falling through its silence.
I don't know why the intrepid
sun touched the bayonet,
but I know that something
stood among those lost trees
& moved only when I moved.

### Facing It

My black face fades,
hiding inside the black granite.
I said I wouldn't,
dammit: No tears.
I'm stone. I'm flesh.
My clouded reflection eyes me
like a bird of prey, the profile of night
slanted against morning. I turn
this way—the stone lets me go.
I turn that way—I'm inside
the Vietnam Veterans Memorial
again, depending on the light
to make a difference.
I go down the 58,022 names,
half-expecting to find
my own in letters like smoke.
I touch the name Andrew Johnson;
I see the booby trap's white flash.
Names shimmer on a woman's blouse
but when she walks away
the names stay on the wall.
Brushstrokes flash, a red bird's
wings cutting across my stare.
The sky. A plane in the sky.
A white vet's image floats
closer to me, then his pale eyes
look through mine. I'm a window.
He's lost his right arm
inside the stone. In the black mirror
a woman's trying to erase names:
No, she's brushing a boy's hair.

Yusef Komunyakaa, "Thanks" and "Facing It" from NEON VERNACULAR © 1993 by Yusef Komunyakaa, Wesleyan University Press, by permission of University Press of New England. "History Lessons" from MAGIC CITY © 1992 by Yusef Komunyakaa, Wesleyan University Press, by permission of University Press of New England.

## mga tula

### Questions

1. Why give thanks for a "monarch/ writhing on a single thread/ tied to a farmer's gate"?
2. How could a white vet lose his right arm inside the stone?
3. What are the history lessons in "History Lessons"?

### Activities

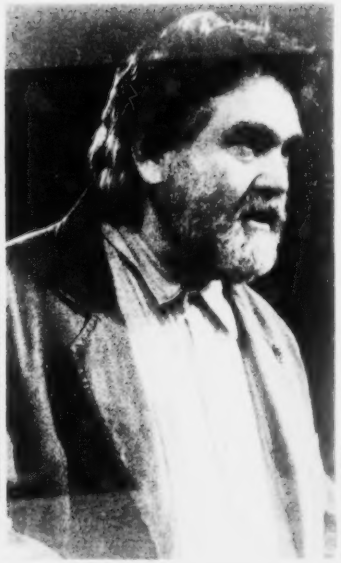
1. Make a list of moments when you had the feeling of being eerily protected. Describe what these moments have in common.
2. With music, dance, or visual images create an experience which illustrates "Facing It."
3. Describe how your experience of "History Lessons" changes when you have access to sections 2 and 3, which were not on the videotape.

# LOUIS JENKINS



***"I think it is important to have humor in poetry because it is so much a part of life."***

*Louis Jenkins has worked as a truck driver, farm hand, oil-field worker, commercial fisherman, and librarian in various parts of the country. He was born in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma in 1942, and the settings of his prose poems sometimes reflect the farming country of Oklahoma and Kansas where he grew up.*



### Too Much Snow

Unlike the Eskimos we only have one word for snow but we have a lot of modifiers for that word. There is too much snow, which, unlike rain, does not immediately run off. It falls and stays for months. Someone wished for this snow. Someone got a deal, five cents on the dollar, and spent the entire family fortune. It's the simple solution, it covers everything. We are never satisfied with the arrangement of the snow so we spend hours moving the snow from one place to another. Too much snow. I box it up and send it to family and friends. I send a big box to my cousin in California. I send a small box to my mother. She writes "Don't send so much. I'm all alone now. I'll never be able to use so much." To you I send a single snowflake, beautiful, complex and delicate; different from all the others.

*What do you have too much of, and how would you distribute it?*

### Appointed Rounds

At first he refused to deliver junk mail because it was stupid, all those deodorant ads, money-making ideas and contests. Then he began to doubt the importance of the other mail he carried. He began to randomly select first class mail for non-delivery. After he had finished his mail route each day he would return home with his handful of letters and put them in the attic. He didn't open them and never even looked at them again. It was as if he were an agent of Fate, capricious and blind. In the several years before he was caught, friends vanished, marriages failed, business deals fell through. Toward the end he became more and more bold, deleting houses, then whole blocks from his route. He began to feel he'd been born in the wrong era. If only he could have been a Pony Express rider galloping into some prairie town with an empty bag, or the runner from Marathon collapsing in the streets of Athens, gasping, "No news."

## PUHOOS

### Activity

Language and culture are closely related. Interview someone who speaks a language besides English. From what culture does the language come? What is one idea or phenomenon in that culture that seems to have more importance in that culture than in English-speaking culture? How does language make that difference apparent? Present your information as a report, play, or poem.

### Question

Louis Jenkins has described the prose poem as a kind of box, like the "lunch box Dad brought home from work at night." The contents of the box are "magic," he says, "for having made a mysterious journey and returned." How do some of the images of "Too Much Snow" and "Appointed Rounds" reflect his description?



"Too Much Snow" by Louis Jenkins. From JUST ABOVE WATER (Holy Cowl Press, 1997). Reprinted by permission of the publisher. "Appointed Rounds" by Louis Jenkins. From NICE FISH: NEW AND SELECTED PROSE POEMS (Holy Cowl Press, 1995). Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

# HAL SIROWITZ



***"My poetry is both serious and funny. I like to make people laugh and at the same time I like to make them think about what they're laughing at."***

*A regular in New York City's downtown poetry scene, Hal Sirowitz has performed live on MTV's* Spoken Word Unplugged *and was featured on the PBS series* The United States of Poetry. *Born in Manhattan in 1949, he now lives in Queens and teaches special education in the New York City public schools.*

© Steve Hiniker Miller

## CHOPPED-OFF ARM

Don't stick your arm out of the window,
Mother said. Another car can sneak up
behind us, & chop it off. Then your father
will have to stop, stick the severed piece
in the trunk, & drive you to the hospital.
It's not like the parts of your telescope
that snap back on. A doctor will have to sew it.
You won't be able to wear short sleeves.
You won't want anyone to see the stitches.

## DEFORMED FINGER

Don't stick your finger in the ketchup bottle,
Mother said. It might get stuck, &
then you'll have to wait for your father
to get home to pull it out. He
won't be happy to find a dirty fingernail
squirming in the ketchup that he's going to use
on his hamburger. He'll yank it out so hard
that for the rest of your life you won't
be able to wear a ring on that finger.
And if you ever get a girlfriend, &
you hold hands, she's bound to ask you
why one of your fingers is deformed,
& you'll be obligated to tell her how
you didn't listen to your mother, &
insisted on playing with a ketchup bottle,
& she'll get to thinking, he probably won't
listen to me either, & she'll push your hand away.

## HORNS ON YOUR HEAD

The further you venture from the house,
Mother said, the fewer people you'll know.
Everyone on this block has either heard
of you or has seen you at one time. But
on the next block maybe only one person
will recognize you. Then there are hundreds
of blocks where no one knows you exist.
And it goes on that way until you get
to Nebraska, where it gets even worse.
There, the people never met a Jew before.
They think you have horns, & will want
to look for them. That's why you should never move
too far away from me. You don't want
strangers to always be touching your head.

### Questions

1. How would you describe this mother's feelings for her son?

2. How would you describe this son's feelings for his mother?

### Activities

1. Make a list of negative instructions given to you by a parent or guardian. Choose the two or three that most interest you and, following Sirowitz's general form, use them to write your own "Mother Said" poems.

2. Assemble a group and experiment with reading these poems, first exactly as Sirowitz reads "Chopped-Off Arm" on the videotape, and then differently, in your own rhythms.

"Chopped-Off Arm," "Deformed Finger," and "Horns on Your Head" from MOTHER SAID by Hal Sirowitz. Copyright © 1996 by Hal Sirowitz. Used by arrangement with Crown Publishers.

*What did your Mother (or Mother-like person) say to you?*

# PHILIP LEVINE



***"For me, writing is a spiritual need. I love doing it well, and I'm willing to do it badly often enough so that I can do it well."***

*Philip Levine was born in 1928 in Detroit, Michigan. He grew up there, and worked in many local industries before leaving for California. He says that he writes poetry "for people for whom there is no poetry—those were the people of Detroit." Many of his poems reflect on the nature of life in urban areas. He has written seventeen books of poetry, one of which won the Pulitzer Prize.*

*How close will you come*
*to the woman working*
*at the polishing wheel?*

## COMING CLOSE

Take this quiet woman, she has been
standing before a polishing wheel
for over three hours, and she lacks
twenty minutes before she can take
a lunch break. Is she a woman?
Consider the arms as they press
the long brass tube against the buffer,
they are striated along the triceps,
the three heads of which clearly show.
Consider the fine dusting of dark down
above the upper lip, and the beads
of sweat that run from under the red
kerchief across the brow and are wiped
away with a blackening wrist band
in one odd motion a child might make
to say No! No! You must come closer
to find out, you must hang your tie
and jacket in one of the lockers
in favor of a black smock, you must
be prepared to spend shift after shift
hauling off the metal trays of stock,
bowing first, knees bent for a purchase,
then lifting with a gasp, the first word
of tenderness between the two of you,
then you must bring new trays of dull,
unpolished tubes. You must feed her,
as they say in the language of the place.
Make no mistake, the place has a language,
and if by some luck the power were cut,
the wheel slowed to a stop so that you
suddenly saw it was not a solid object
but so many separate bristles forming
in motion a perfect circle, she would turn
to you and say, "Why?" Not the old *why*
of *why must I spend five nights a week?*
Just, "Why?" Even if by some magic
you knew, you wouldn't dare speak
for fear of her laughter, which now
you have anyway as she places the five
tapering fingers of her filthy hand
on the arm of your white shirt to mark
you for your own, now and forever.

*filidheachd*

*filidheachd* is Gaelic for poetry.

# PHILIP LEVINE

## M. DEGAS TEACHES ART & SCIENCE AT DURFEE INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL

***Detroit, 1942***

He made a line on the blackboard,
one bold stroke from right to left
diagonally downward and stood back
to ask, looking as always at no one
in particular, "What have I done?"
From the back of the room Freddie
shouted, "You've broken a piece
of chalk." M. Degas did not smile.
"What have I done?" he repeated.
The most intellectual students
looked down to study their desks
except for Gertrude Bimmler, who raised
her hand before she spoke. "M. Degas,
you have created the hypotenuse
of an isosceles triangle." Degas mused.
Everyone knew that Gertrude could not
be incorrect. "It is possible,"
Louis Warshowsky added precisely,
"that you have begun to represent
the roof of a barn." I remember
that it was exactly twenty minutes
past eleven, and I thought at worst
this would go on another forty
minutes. It was early April,
the snow had all but melted on
the playgrounds, the elms and maples
bordering the cracked walks shivered
in the new winds, and I believed
that before I knew it I'd be
swaggering to the candy store
for a Milky Way. M. Degas
pursed his lips, and the room
stilled until the long hand
of the clock moved to twenty one
as though in complicity with Gertrude,
who added confidently, "You've begun
to separate the dark from the dark."
I looked back for help, but now
the trees bucked and quaked, and I
knew this could go on forever.

"Coming Close" and "M. Degas Teaches Art & Science at Durfee Intermediate School" by Philip Levine. From WHAT WORK IS by Philip Levine. Copyright © 1991 by Philip Levine. Used by arrangement with Alfred A. Knopf, New York.

poezja

### Questions

1. How might "Coming Close" be different if it were told from the woman's point of view?

2. Edgar Degas was a famous French painter who lived from 1834 to 1917. How did Philip Levine get Edgar Degas to teach at Durfee Intermediate School in Detroit in 1942?

### Activities

1. Like the woman in the factory, many people are employed in jobs that are difficult, perhaps dirty, and unglamorous, yet their work is important. Identify an unsung worker in your community. If possible, interview the person and describe his or her job and its importance. Describe the language of the place where the person works.

2. Philip Levine says "M.Degas" is a poem of "immense affection" for his teacher. Create something that shows immense affection for someone in your life—someone you know personally or someone you admire from a distance. Your creation could take any form—writing, music, painting, drawing, collage, or sculpture.

3. "M. Degas" is clearly based on Philip Levine's memories of his school experiences. Using your memories, describe an event that occurred earlier in your life, including descriptions of personality traits of the people involved and some of the actual words spoken.

4. Write a poem in which you imagine a famous person teaching at your school. Exaggerate the possible outcome.

# JOY HARJO

***"I like blurring so many lines, doing the poetry and the music, because I think I'm here to help create or find a new place in the borders which always eventually become the center."***

*In her performances, Joy Harjo often recites poems and plays the saxophone. The music may be another expression of the inner old Creek Indian who she says often guides her when she writes. Born in Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1951, Joy Harjo is the daughter of a Creek father and French-Cherokee mother.*

**For Anna Mae Pictou Aquash, Whose Spirit Is Present Here and in the Dappled Stars (for we remember the story and must tell it again so we may all live)**

Beneath a sky blurred with mist and wind,
I am amazed as I watch the violet
heads of crocuses erupt from the stiff earth
after dying for a season,
as I have watched my own dark head
appear each morning after entering
the next world
to come back to this one,
amazed.
It is the way in the natural world to understand the place
the ghost dancers named
after the heart/breaking destruction.
Anna Mae,
everything and nothing changes.
You are the shimmering young woman
who found her voice,
when you were warned to be silent, or have your body cut away
from you like an elegant weed.
You are the one whose spirit is present in the dappled stars.
(They prance and lope like colored horses who stay with us
through the streets of these steely cities. And I have see them
nuzzling the frozen bodies of tattered drunks
on the corner.)
This morning when the last star is dimming
and the buses grind toward
the middle of the city, I know it is ten years since they buried you
the second time in Lakota, a language that could
free you.
I heard about it in Oklahoma, or New Mexico,
how the wind howled and pulled everything down
in a righteous anger.
(It was the women who told me) and we understood wordlessly
the ripe meaning of your murder.
As I understand ten years later after the slow changing
of the seasons
that we have just begun to touch
the dazzling whirlwind of our anger,
we have just begun to perceive the amazed world of the ghost dancers
entered
crazily, beautifully.

*In February 1976, an unidentified body of a young woman was found on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. The official autopsy attributed her death to exposure. The FBI agent present at the autopsy ordered her hands severed and sent to Washington for fingerprinting. John Trudell rightly called this mutilation an act of war. Her unnamed body was buried. When Anna Mae Aquash, a young Micmac woman who was an active American Indian Movement member, was discovered missing by her friends and relatives, a second autopsy was demanded. It was then discovered she had been killed by a bullet fired at close range to the back of her head. Her killer or killers have yet to be identified.*

## Question

What are some of the contrasting images of the poem? How do they add to its tone and overall impact?

## Activity

Compare this poem with "Big girl, Little girl" by Lê Thi Diem Thúy. How do you suppose each poet might have written about the other's experience?

*What have you understood*
*wordlessly, and with whom?*

Joy Harjo, "For Anna Mae Pictou Aquash: ..." from IN MAD LOVE AND WAR © 1990 by Joy Harjo. Wesleyan University Press, by permission of University Press of New England.

# ROBERT CREELEY



***"Every time you write a poem you can think, 'Is that a real poem or is it just something I made up myself?' If what you have written is not a real poem, then what is a real poem?"***

*Born in Arlington, Massachusetts in 1926, Robert Creeley pioneered a spontaneous poetry crafted from natural rhythms based in the breath. He has taught at universities since 1962 and for thirty years at the State University of New York at Buffalo. He was appointed New York State Poet from 1989 to 1991.*

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### I Know a Man

As I sd to my
friend, because I am
always talking,—John, I

sd, which was not his
name, the darkness sur-
rounds us, what

can we do against
it, or else, shall we &
why not, buy a goddamn big car,

drive, he sd, for
christ's sake, look
out where yr going.

*from* **So There**
*for Penelope*

Da. Da. Da da.
Where is the song.
What's wrong
with life

ever. More?
Or less—
days, nights,
these

days. *What's gone*
*is gone forever*
*every time,* old friend's
voice here. I want

to stay, somehow,
if I could—
if I would? Where else
to go.

The sea here's out
the window, old
switcher's house, vertical,
railroad blues, *lonesome*

*whistle,* etc. Can you
think of Yee's Café
in Needles, California
opposite the train

station—can you keep
it ever
together, old buddy, talking
to yourself again?

*What would you do against the darkness*
*which surrounds us, or else, & why not . . . ?*

## Questions

1. What would your English teacher red-pencil in "I Know a Man"? What does Creely gain by writing the poem according to his speakers' own spelling and punctuation habits?

2. Why does "I Know a Man" contain no quotation marks?

3. Who is the speaker of the first three stanzas of "I Know a Man" and what do you know about him? Do you identify more with him or with the speaker of the last stanza?

## Activities

1. Assemble a group and take turns reading "I Know a Man," experimenting with speed, emphasis, and tone of voice.

2. From images cut out of magazines and newspapers, create a collage that illustrates "I Know a Man."

"I Know a Man" and "So There" by Robert Creeley. From SELECTED POEMS by Robert Creeley. University of California Press. Copyright © 1991 by The Regents of the University of California.

شعر *Arabic for poetry*

# BRENDA HILLMAN



***"The interesting way to go is not toward making any piece of work better but toward making it weirder, more itself. Try letting go of the ideal of the perfect poem. Perfection may lie in falling apart."***

*Brenda Hillman's demanding poetry often cites divergent influences including gnosticism, alchemy, feminist literary theory, and "science-for-normal-people." Born in Tucson, Arizona in 1951, she has published six volumes of poetry. She teaches at St. Mary's College in Moraga, California and lives in the Bay Area with her husband, the poet Robert Hass.*

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**Black Series**

—Then in the scalloped leaves of the plane tree
a series of short, sharp who's:
a little owl had learned to count.

You lay in your bed as usual not existing
because of the bright edges pressing in.

All at once the black thick o's of the owl
made the very diagram you needed.
Where there had been two
kinds of infinity, now there was one!
The smudged circle around the soul
was the one the gnostics saw around the cosmos,
the mathematical
toy train, the snake eating its tail.

Relieved by the thought that the owl's o's
had changed but not you, that something
could change and not be lost in you,

you asked the voice for more
existence and the voice said
yes but you must understand
I loved you not despite your great emptiness
but because of your great emptiness—

**Time Problem**

The problem
of time.  Of there not being
enough of it.

My girl came to the study
and said Help me;
I told her I had a time problem
which meant:
I would die for you but I don't have ten minutes.
Numbers hung in the math book
like motel coathangers.  The Lean
Cuisine was burning
like an ancient city: black at the edges,
bubbly earth tones in the center.
The latest thing they're saying is lack
of time might be
a "woman's problem." She sat there
with her math book sobbing—
(turned out to be prime factoring: whole numbers
dangle in little nooses)
Hawking says if you back up far enough
it's not even
an issue, time falls away into
'the curve' which is finite,
boundaryless. Appointment book,
soprano telephone—
(beep End beep went the microwave)

The hands fell off my watch in the night.
I spoke to the spirit
who took them, told her: Time is the funniest thing
they invented. Had wakened from a big
dream of love in a boat—
No time to get the watch fixed so the blank face
lived for months in my dresser,

*(continued)*

# BRENDA HILLMAN

**Time Problem** *(continued)*

no arrows
for hands, just quartz intentions, just the pinocchio
nose (before the lie)
left in the center; the watch
didn't have twenty minutes; neither did I.

My girl was doing
her gym clothes by herself; (red leaked
toward black, then into the white
insignia) I was grading papers,
heard her call from the laundry room:
Mama?
Hawking says there are two
types of it,
real and imaginary (imaginary time must be
like decaf), says it's meaningless
to decide which is which
but I say: there was tomorrow-
and-a-half
when I started thinking about it; now
there's less than a day. More
done. That's
the thing that keeps being said. I thought
I could get more done as in:
fish stew from a book. As in: Versateller
archon, then push-push-push
the tired-tired around the track like a planet.
Legs, remember him?
Our love—when we stagger—lies down inside us.
Hawking says
there are little folds in time
(actually he calls them wormholes)
but I say:
there's a universe beyond
where they're hammering the brass cut-outs . . .
Push us out in the boat and leave time here—

(because: where in the plan was it written,
You'll be too busy to close parentheses,
the snapdragon's bunchy mouth needs water,
even the caterpillar will hurry past you?
Pulled the travel alarm
to my face: the black
behind the phosphorous argument kept the dark
from being ruined. Opened
the art book
—saw the languorous wrists of the lady
in Tissot's "Summer Evening." Relaxed. Turning
gently. The glove
(just slightly—but still:)
"aghast";
opened Hawking, he says, time gets smoothed
into a fourth dimension
but I say
space thought it up, as in: Let's make
a baby space, and then
it missed. Were seconds born early, and why
didn't things unhappen also, such as
the tree became Daphne . . .

At the beginning of harvest, we felt
the seven directions.
Time did not visit us. We slept
till noon.
With one voice I called him, with one voice
I let him sleep, remembering
summer years ago,
I had come to visit him in the house of last straws
and when he returned
above the garden of pears, he said
our weeping caused the dew . . .

I have borrowed the little boat
and I say to him Come into the little boat,
you were happy there;

the evening reverses itself, we'll push out
onto the pond,
or onto the reflection of the pond,
whichever one is eternal—



mele

## Questions

1. What kind of time problems is the speaker of "Time Problem" having?

2. What is the effect of the punctuation in "Black Series"— only beginning and concluding dashes?

3. What is Stephen Hawking doing in "Time Problem," and why does he disappear toward the end of the poem?

## Activities

1. Research Stephen Hawking and report on his ideas about time.

2. Research the gnostics and explain why they appear in "Black Series."

Brenda Hillman, "Black Series" from BRIGHT EXISTENCE © 1993 by Brenda Hillman, Wesleyan University Press, by permission of University Press of New England. "Time Problem" from LOOSE SUGAR © 1997 by Brenda Hillman, Wesleyan University Press, by permission of University Press of New England.

# WOMEN AND POETRY

POETRY HEAVEN
Part 1

## BRENDA HILLMAN, THYLIAS MOSS, CAROL MUSKE, AND PATTIANN ROGERS

Pattiann Rogers says that because "the mother's voice is essentially absent" from the Western canon, women need to work to get that voice represented. Thylias Moss says that it is essential for her to be a writer first and a wife and mother only in relation to that identity. What is the disagreement between these two women? With whom are you more in agreement? Why?

While Carol Muske says about the label "woman poet," "it's irrelevant," Brenda Hillman says, "I love my camp." What are they disagreeing about? With which point of view do you have more sympathy? Why?

How do the poems of these four women support or contradict their statements?

**Assemble a group and let each person assume the position taken by one of the poets in this conversation. Continue the conversation on your own.**

barddoniaeth

# POETRY AND WORK

POETRY HEAVEN
Part 3

## LOUIS JENKINS, YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA, AND PHILIP LEVINE

Philip Levine says, "Poetry is work." He even says that "it's the hardest work I've ever done." Why might poetry be the hardest work one could do?

Louis Jenkins has felt that he was slumming when he was doing other work, for money, and that he was really a poet. How far should we go in defining ourselves by the work we do for money? What is the difference between writing as these poets describe it and a hobby?

Yusef Komunyakaa says that his father, a carpenter, thought that "if you didn't work with your hands, then you weren't a complete person." How is poetry in fact like carpentry?

How do the poems of these three men support or contradict their statements?

# POETRY AND HISTORY

POETRY HEAVEN
Part 2

The poets who discuss this topic have different opinions about history and its relationship to poetry. For example, Li-Young Lee wants to forget history, but Yusef Komunyakaa says it's important to remember forgotten voices. Louis Jenkins finds that there's not much history to write about; whereas Robert Hass says that "poetry . . . has been a much more powerful creator of 'history' than anything else."

## Questions

1. Li-Young Lee is Chinese but was born in Indonesia. His family was persecuted in Indonesia and fled that country, moving to several other countries before arriving in the United States. Li-Young Lee says he has a sense of "homelessness" even though he has lived in the United States for some time. These are a few lines from his poem, "The Interrogation," from *The City in Which I Love You* [the complete text can be found on the Dodge Web site (www. grdodge.org/poetry)]:

. . .
I'm through
with memory,
. . .
*Which house did we flee by night? Which house did we flee by day?*

Don't ask me.

*We stood and watched one burn; from one we ran away.*

I'm neatly folding
the nights and days, notes
to be forgotten
. . .

How do you think Li-Young Lee's experiences shaped his thoughts and feelings about history and memory?

2. Yusef Komunyakaa's "History Lesson" describes a memory of a horrendous act—a lynching. Why do you think the poet chose to record this painful event in a poem? How can a poem serve as a lesson about history?

## Activities

1. In a small group, discuss your view of how poetry relates to history and how history relates to poetry. With which of the poets discussing "Poetry and History" do you agree? Why?

2. Many poets have written about events in history. Choose a poem about a historical event. You might choose from poets such as Homer, Frances Watkins Harper, Walt Whitman, John Greenleaf Whittier, Gwendolyn Brooks, Robert Frost, Edna St. Vincent Millay, or W.H. Auden. Then read an account of the same event as written in a history book. How do the two compare? What are the values of each?

3. What is the history you need to write about? What do you need to say? Write your response in the form of a poem or essay.

# A SHARED LIFE OF POETRY

POETRY HEAVEN
Part 3

Robert Hass and Brenda Hillman are both poets, and they are married to each other. They describe some of the difficulties and joys of sharing the same occupation.

## Questions

1. Of her marriage to Robert Hass, Brenda Hillman says, ". . . we keep it a secret as much as possible." Why do you think she might be kidding when she says this? Could she also be serious about it? Why?

2. In your opinion what might be some of the difficulties and joys that might occur between two married people who have the same occupation? Do you think the difficulties and joys would be any different than between two married people who have different occupations? Why?

3. Why must a poet "go away" in order to "get the treasure"? Where do you think the poet goes? What is the treasure?

## Activities

1. Look into the lives of other modern poet couples, such as Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes, or Donald Hall and Jane Kenyon. How does Robert Hass's and Brenda Hillman's conversation relate to the lives and careers of another poet couple?

2. Look into the lives of other couples who are not poets but who share the same occupation. You might investigate two actors, two singers, two postal workers, two teachers, or two doctors. Describe how their experiences compare to those of Robert Hass and Brenda Hillman.